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# China: The Pessoptimist Nation

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By William A. Callahan

China is the most optimistic nation in the world. 86 percent think that their country is headed in the right direction, up from 48 percent in 2002 according to the latest Pew Global Attitudes survey.

There are good reasons to be hopeful. 2008 is important not only because Beijing is hosting the Olympics. This year Chinese people are also celebrating thirty years of Deng Xiaoping's economic reform policy, whose double digit economic growth has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty, and created a new middle class that is larger than most European countries.

But China's nationalistic pride takes pessimistic forms too. Recent bumps in the road of China's rise have produced fierce reactions from Chinese people. Rather than wondering why Tibetan people would protest Chinese rule, Han Chinese rallied against the "bias" of Westerners who criticized their country. Last year when Western companies recalled unsafe Chinese-made toys, opinion-makers in China called for apologies not just from toy companies, but also from Western media for staining China's national image.

Chinese public opinion not only targets foreigners, but increasingly attacks other Chinese.

Grace Wang was physically threatened when she tried to mediate between Chinese and Tibetans at Duke University in the U.S. Her family back home in China was forced into hiding.

Wheelchair-bound Jin Jing became a hero in China when she resisted protestors during the Olympic Torch Relay in Paris. But she was vilified a few weeks later when she refused to support a popular boycott against the French hypermarket Carrefour.

By going against China's raging internet opinion, these two women were both denounced as traitors. As the Olympic celebration has approached, violence against foreign critics and Chinese "traitors" has increased, moving from denunciations on the web to bullying on the streets.

How can we understand these radical shifts between celebration and protest? Rather than simply being "a land of contradictions," I think it is necessary to see how China's sense of pride and sense of humiliation actually are joined at the hip.

While opinion in Western countries typically is polarized between left and right, in China it is usually the same people who are wildly optimistic one day, and deeply pessimistic the next. China's "angry youth" who flare against foreign and domestic critics are also the most prosperous segment of Chinese society.

To put it simply, China is a pessoptimist nation.

These mixed feelings come from the party-state's official patriotic education campaign that looks to both positive and negative stories. On the one hand, Chinese textbooks are not strange: they point to the glories of ancient civilization and recent economic success.

But patriotic education also includes a heavy dose of "national humiliation education" that narrates China's modern history as a series of shameful defeats since the Opium War in 1840. Textbooks explain that a combination of "foreign aggression" and "corrupt traitors" are to blame for China's troubled modern history. As recent events have shown, this dynamic of internal and external enemies continues to frame the common sense understanding of international politics in China.

The pessoptimist patriotic education campaign is not limited to textbooks or classrooms. National humiliation is a popular topic in feature films, museum exhibits, romance novels, pop songs, patriotic poems, specialist dictionaries, pictorials and commemorative stamps. Since 2001, China has even had

an official National Humiliation Day, which it celebrates each September. A popular historical atlas is entitled "Maps of the Century of National Humiliation of Modern China."

The Chinese Communist Party's Propaganda Department thus has honed patriotic education into a multimedia campaign that ties patriotism very firmly to the party-state.

But it would be a mistake to conclude that pessoptimism is just propaganda used by the party elite to manipulate the people. These mixed feelings also grow out of a popular sense that China is coming into its own after over a century of being left out—and left behind. Rather than a rise and fall, Chinese people think that their country is—at last—experiencing a rise after a fall, a rejuvenation after a century of national humiliation.

Because Chinese people feel that their country is resuming its rightful place as a superpower at the center of the world, any criticism is seen as an obstacle to the PRC's "inevitable rise." Although China's leaders sound silly whenever they state that foreign critics have "hurt the feelings of the Chinese people," there is a grain of truth in this complaint. This mix of entitlement and righteous anger is very strong in China.

Pessoptimistic nationalism is thus continually produced and consumed in China in a circular process that knits together urban elites and rural peasants, northerners and southerners, government officials and the new middle class.

Yet this aggressive nationalism it is not the only way of understanding China's past, present and future. Actually, "national humiliation" only became a key education and propaganda theme in the 1990s as a way to make rebellious students feel more patriotic after the June 4th massacre. Unfortunately, this tactical method of dealing with the communist party's legitimacy crisis has become China's most successful propaganda campaign.

The party-state's policy thus both feeds into and grows out of pessoptimist feelings among ordinary Chinese. Patriotic education and popular opinion are interwoven, just as pride and humiliation are intertwined. China's domestic politics are inseparable from its foreign relations in a way that intimately binds together national security with nationalist insecurities.

Here China is certainly not alone. The line between domestic and international politics is blurring in most places. Other countries also use national humiliation themes to understand national history and foreign relations: Serbia, South Korea and occasionally Russia.

The rise of pessoptimism in China is important not because China is unique, but because it is big—and getting bigger all the time economically, politically and culturally.

It is crucial to understand that China's pessoptimism is fundamentally unstable, producing shifting feelings, which at any time could spill over into mass movements that target domestic critics, foreigners and even the party-state itself.

While it is necessary to welcome China into the international community and encourage more moderate voices in Beijing, the most important thing to recognize is that China's pessoptimist nationalism is out of anyone's control. Even mundane economic twists can provoke extreme reactions: when the value of China's investment in the Blackstone Group tanked last summer, an influential Chinese blogger sensationally blamed greedy Westerners for looting China much as their ancestors had during the Opium War.

As the Olympics are showing, China's leaders are able to control many aspects of Chinese society—even the weather. But beyond long-term education and media reform (neither of which is forthcoming), China's leaders can't control popular feelings.

During the Olympics we are certainly seeing much genuine happiness and gracious hospitality from Chinese people. But since China also has a huge chip on its shoulder, we need to be prepared for a

harsh popular reaction whenever China hits a bump on its rocky road of political and economic change.

Perhaps American satirist Stephen Colbert said it best when he described China as a 'frenemy'—at least that's how pessoptimistic Chinese see the rest of the world.

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**Tags:** [Chinese nationalism](#), [international relations](#), [The 2008 Beijing Olympics](#)